Depression and Conquering Your Inner Critic

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Depression and Overcoming Your Inner Critic

Everybody has it. Though you may not notice it all the time, it is there, working. It changes the way you see the world, the people you come in contact with and every aspect of yourself. It is a powerful and potentially dangerous force in your life. It is your inner critic.

If real life were a cartoon, your inner critic would be a little man standing on your shoulder, probably wearing a red suit and little horns on his head. Everything he whispers in your ear is negative. If you are in a good mood, he brings you down. If you are feeling low, he makes you lower.

Unfortunately, this is not a cartoon. This is real life and your inner critic is invisible. He lives deep in your unconscious mind and filters all of the stimuli you come across and all of your experiences. He finds ways to make everything you see and do more negative, and drains the optimism from your life.

Taking power and control back from your inner critic is a complex, challenging and time-consuming task, but one that is worth undertaking. If you can understand your critic, trace his stem to the roots, pull them out and replace him with someone more desirable, your life will be much happier and satisfying. Here's how:

Core Beliefs

In clinical terms, your inner critic is a core belief. A core belief manages your perceptions of your life, and in a world where perceptions are reality, core beliefs carry a lot of weight. Core beliefs are at the center of you and begin to develop from birth. Every experience you have, everything you have learned, everything you have seen factors into your core beliefs.

Everyone has core beliefs. High functioning, happy people will have core beliefs that are more positive and hopeful. People that are depressed or mentally unhealthy tend to have core beliefs that are negative and inspire hopelessness. Core beliefs are simple, discreet statements with a lot of emotional attachment to them. Examples of positive core beliefs include:

- The world is a good, positive place.
- People are generally friendly and helpful.
- I am a good person.
- My husband loves me.
- I am worthwhile.

Next page: negative core beliefs and origins of beliefs.

Core Beliefs

Examples of negative core beliefs include:

- The world is a scary, dangerous place.
- People will hurt you given the opportunity.
- I am a terrible person.
- No one loves me.
- I am worthless.

Core beliefs strike a strong resemblance to self-talk. Self-talk is the internal conversation that you have with yourself throughout the day. They both occur unconsciously for the most part. They both filter your perceptions of the world. The difference is that self-talk can change daily, whereas a core belief is more static. Waking up to sunshine or having a good hair day can sway self-talk towards being more positive while core beliefs are steadfast.

If your good days are fleeting and always seem to give way to bad days, your core beliefs are your problem.

Origins of Beliefs

As mentioned, every experience you have had contributes and adds to your core beliefs. The people you spend the most time with during your childhood are major factors in the development of your beliefs. Consider your parents. What types of messages did they send you verbally or through their actions?

If you endured abandonment from one or both of your parents during early years, you may come to have the core belief that you are worthless or unlovable. This may cause you to constantly seek out approval and affection from others or choose a life of solitude rather than risk further rejection. If you witnessed abuse or alcoholism in your childhood, you may build the belief that this behavior was expected and acceptable. This may lead you to follow in their mistakes.

Identify Your Beliefs

Your core beliefs might match those listed above or might be drastically different. In either case, taking action to create a working knowledge of your core belief or beliefs is a must. Here's how:

- **Study your experience.** Looking at your life from a fresh perspective can give you clues about your core beliefs. What types of situation or experiences do you seek out? What do you avoid? Consult with friends to get their opinions and perspectives. Remember, if depressive core beliefs are active in your life, your perspective will be distorted negatively.
- **Study your emotional reactions.** Journaling is a great way to process and deal with the emotion of day. If you do journal, look through old pages to find trends and patterns. If a stranger on the street stared at you and your mood became more depressed or you felt more anxious, your core belief could have to do with people judging you.
- **Study your thoughts.** Your thoughts are always circling in your mind. Not noticing them indicates that they are being moved to the unconscious. In every experience, there is an event, your perception of the event and your reaction to the event. Try to pay more attention to your perceptions. At times, these can be instinctual and tough to notice but they exist. What is your favorite color? What is your favorite kind of music? What smells do you enjoy? These preferences may be hard to understand but they develop much in the same way as core beliefs. If oldies remind you of fun, stress-free times, they might be your favorite.

Next page: changing your beliefs.

Change Your Beliefs

If identifying your core belief is difficult, changing it is even more challenging. Core beliefs are rigid and static.

They resist change and do so by constantly seeking out examples that strengthen their view. Imagine that a core belief is a round hole. The round hole only accepts round pegs. If your core belief is that people don't like you, it will misinterpret and accept the time someone stared at you or the time that you thought someone was laughing at you. It will not accept square pegs. Square pegs would be when people compliment you or smile in your direction. Your core belief will reject these by finding irrational explanations to dismiss them as if they never even happened.

Changing your beliefs takes awareness, patience and consistency. Here's how:

- **Detect.** This means building awareness of what your core beliefs are and how they impact your life. Monitor times where the actions of others trigger an emotional response in you. Develop a cause and effect understanding. For example, a stranger stared at me and this made me feel self-conscious.

- **Debate.** This step is the most crucial. Before beginning, you must understand that your depression wants you to be more depressed. Here, you must work to objectively reflect on the situation to see if the cause and effect from above makes sense. Does someone staring at me mean they don't like me? What are other possible explanations? Maybe they liked your shirt or thought you looked familiar. Maybe they were looking behind you. Maybe they were just staring into space because they were distracted. Use your rational mind to offer counter arguments.
- **Decide.** Using the information from the debate, make a decision about the situation while considering your goal. Is your goal to find your "truth" or to be happy? Many times people believe "I feel it so it must be true." In reality, your truth is only your perception of the situation. Your truth will not match the truth of the other person. Choosing happiness means that you decide to believe the explanation that ignores depression and negative core beliefs.

These steps signify a reaction to situational circumstances. To be more active and preventative in your work to change core beliefs, build a new core belief. This approach involves creating a motto that you can repeat to yourself. Like a core belief, your mantra should be short, concrete and represent how you want to see yourself. Saying "I am a good, worthwhile person" will reduce contrary core beliefs. Repetition will help ensure that this motto becomes a part of your life.

Your mantra will be more beneficial if it pushes your comfort zone an appropriate amount without being overly unbelievable. Saying "I'm the greatest person that ever lived" fits into the unbelievable category. Avoid using qualifiers in your motto like 'sometimes', 'often', 'usually', 'sort of' and 'kind of' because these diminish the positive impact your new core belief will yield.

Conclusion

Everyone has an inner critic. Changing it is not quite as easy as brushing a well-dressed little man off your shoulder, but change is possible. You do not have to be stuck with a core belief that negatively impacts your life. Understanding, identifying and working to change or replace your core belief is possible. Follow the steps above to pull the weed out by the root and plant a blossoming flower in its place.